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SUBJECT: ROK FORMER FM: BEWARE LATENT ANTI-AMERICANISM

Classified By: Ambassador Kathleen Stephens. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In an April 2 breakfast meeting with the Ambassador, former Roh Administration Foreign Minister and current National Assembly Member (Democratic Party) Song Min-soon said debate over the KORUS FTA had the potential, if not handled carefully by the Korean government, to reignite anti-American sentiment. Afghanistan, camp returns, and base relocations were also potential anti-American flash points. Song was critical of the Lee administration's North Korea policy, arguing that the ROK must show more flexibility with the North if it wants to ease tensions. Lamenting the differences between the culture of his former life as a career diplomat and the rough-and-tumble, winner-takes-all culture of Korean politics, Song said he supports proposed reforms in the National Assembly to institutionalize majoritarian rule. End Summary.

Potential Anti-American Flashpoints

¶2. (C) Song, in a cordial April 2 breakfast meeting with the Ambassador, noted that the U.S.-Korea relationship is as strong as it has ever been and has recovered from last year's U.S. beef protests, but offered one word of caution: beware giving anti-Americanism any excuse to rear its head. Korea's handling of the KORUS FTA, Song said, is the most serious potential anti-American flashpoint on the horizon. Song, an FTA supporter, said it was a mistake for the Lee administration to push for ratification ahead of action by the U.S. Congress. If Korea ratifies the FTA now and then in the future has to renegotiate what the Korean public thought was a done deal, anti-American elements could use the renegotiations as an example of Korea being forced to bend to America's will. Song said he is a proponent of the National Assembly committing to a vote on the FTA within one month of the Obama administration's submission of the FTA to the U.S. Congress, but not before. The Ambassador observed that Korea's decision on when to ratify the FTA was a decision only Korea could make.

¶3. (C) Song said the Korean government had to handle the U.S. request for assistance in Afghanistan carefully, lest anti-American elements exploit the issue. Song said combat troops would be the most meaningful contribution Korea could make in Afghanistan. But the Korean public was not yet prepared to support sending troops, because, first, many Koreans associated Afghanistan with the perceived unjustness of the Iraq war and, second, Afghanistan is such a complicated problem that many Koreans viewed it as a quagmire.

¶4. (C) Other potential flashpoints, Song said, were camp returns and base relocations. Camp returns presented the

possibility of hard feelings if the public did not see the U.S. doing its share to take responsibility for environmental cleanup. The issue of the U.S. using burden sharing money to relocate and consolidate bases was also an issue that should be managed well, he said.

President Lee's North Korea Policy

15. (C) Song was highly critical of President Lee's North Korea policy. He said Lee viewed the North Korea problem through a moralistic lens which cast the North as an evil antagonist, making it difficult for Lee to formulate a pragmatic policy with any hope of success. Lee's insistence on reciprocity was unrealistic because the cards played by the South and North are asymmetrical and do not fit neatly in a step-by-step, action-for-action framework. And, Song said, Lee's policy was so focused on bringing the North to negotiations on the South's terms that it missed the big picture, for example, of China's critical role in bringing about any long-term solution for peace on the peninsula.

16. (C) Song said, not surprisingly, that a policy more in line with President Roh's strategy of feeding the North "sugar-coated poison" in the form of economic assistance was needed and that Roh's policy would have eventually, if given enough time, transformed the North. Song was concerned, however, that Lee had isolated himself from any meaningful criticism of his policy and was not able to see the alternatives. Song related Lee's reputation when he was a CEO of excluding from meetings people who disagreed with him. That style of leadership might have worked when running a company, but Korea is too big and the problems too complicated to not include more voices in formulating responses to the problems confronting the country.

State of the National Assembly

17. (C) Song, a career diplomat before becoming a National Assembly member, said he has found the transition from the rationale and constructive negotiations of the diplomatic world to the polarized and uncompromising fights that define Korean domestic politics difficult. But he was optimistic that Korea's young democracy was on a trajectory to develop into a more mature and congenial system of politics. Despite being a member of the opposition Democratic Party, Song said he believed it was in Korea's interest to truly accept the idea of majority rule and move beyond the current impasse of legislative progress being held captive to a demand for an elusive and ill-defined consensus. So, for example, Song said he would support a soon-to-be-introduced proposal in the National Assembly to establish a filibuster that could be overridden by a super majority of 2/3.

Comment

18. (C) Song's meeting with the Ambassador is a reminder that the U.S.-Korea relationship transcends party politics in Korea. Having advised former President Roh during the KORUS FTA negotiations, Song strongly believes it is in Korea's economic interest to see the FTA approved. And having been a key player in the formulation of the ROK's North Korea policy during the Roh administration, he is clearly frustrated by the Lee administration's policy reversals. But he is proud that the 2005 Joint Statement, which he helped negotiate, still defines the framework of principles on which U.S. policy is based.

STEPHENS